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## Local scientists blazing a hot trail to icy Antarctica

By Marina Emmanuel

PENANG, Sat. - One of the few places on Earth which has never experienced war is Antarctica.

The 'White Continent', remote, unforgiving and uninhabited, is an environment which is fully protected and where scientific research is accorded priority.

A nature reserve set aside exclusively for peace and science, this icy continent is protected by the Antarctic Treaty, which came into force on June 23, 1961, after ratification by the 12 countries then active in Antarctic science.

The treaty's goals are:

- \* To demilitarise Antarctica, establish it as a zone free of nuclear tests and the disposal of radioactive waste, and to ensure it is used for peaceful purposes only;

- \* To promote international scientific co-operation in Antarctica; and,

- \* To set aside disputes over territorial sovereignty.

Although Malaysia's involvement in Antarctic research dates back less than a decade, it has wasted no time in making its presence felt in the global community of Antarctic scientists.

Despite the country being a relatively new player in Antarctic scientific endeavours, more than 30 Malaysian scientists have visited the continent.

"The country is also fortunate to have had such a visionary leader such as former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who initiated, promoted and motivated the Malaysian scientists," says Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Biological Science dean Professor Dr Mashhor Mansor. Describing the Antarctica as a "laboratory in itself", Mashhor, who went on a month-long expedition there last year, is a firm believer that scientists cannot remain in laboratories.

He waxes lyrical over the beauty of the voyage and the inspiration drawn from the 'Science Continent', whose environment he described as "harsh".

And no wonder. Its temperatures plunge from minus one degree Celsius to minus 30 degrees within an hour.

"It is a great place for science and the landscape is fantastic. It is possible to see the sun and moon at the same time, but is certainly no holiday destination," he said.

"Antarctica holds the key to what happened when our land mass broke away 200 million years ago." He said Malaysian scientists need to experience Antarctic.

Although the recommended age for scientists and researchers to journey to Antarctica is between 35 and 40, he was not deterred from venturing there at the age of 52 last year.

"Dr Mahathir was my inspiration to do research in Antarctica and I was mindful that the extreme weather could kill me."

Kelantan-born Mashhor underwent stringent medical tests, embraced a vegetarian diet and walked long distances as part of a regimen to prepare for trip.

"The potential for gain from a trip of this nature is endless," said Mashhor, a professor of Aquatic Botany, who describes Antarctica as "science at work".

"It has the worst weather in the world, but its beauty turns a scientist into an artist."

And it is this beauty of science which brought out the artistic side in Mashhor, which is evident in his book, Merintis Jalan ke-Antarctica (Journey to Antarctica).

The book, written in layman's language, serves as a tribute to Dr Mahathir and attempts to convey to Malaysians, especially schoolchildren, the beauty of science.

Mashhor will present the book to Dr Mahathir here at an international seminar organised by USM and the Malaysian Academy of Sciences on Monday.

The 2nd Malaysian International Seminar on Antarctica is to facilitate the promotion of scientific research by Malaysian scientists in Antarctica.

Dr Mahathir will present the keynote address on "Policies of Antarctica: What is the role of developing countries in Antarctica?"

The event, to be opened by Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, will see the participation of Malaysian and international scientists, policymakers and students from Penang schools.

Mashhor said: "We want to expose schoolchildren to the potential of exploring the world, notably Antarctica, which is considered the 'Continent for Science'."

"This sort of exposure is needed to bring Malaysians into an international scientific arena of first-class research work with well-known scientists."

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